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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001096

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/23/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: GEMAYEL UPBEAT ABOUT BY-ELECTION, ANXIOUS ABOUT  
PRESIDENCY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
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SUMMARY

1. (C) In a July 23 meeting with the Ambassador, former President Amine Gemayel was confident he would win his murdered son Pierre's parliamentary seat in the Metn district by-election scheduled for August 5. Noting the polls gave him the advantage, he said his opponent, Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and Aoun bloc candidate Camille Khoury, was not a real threat. Furthermore, Tashnaq's (Armenian Christian party) support of Aoun's FPM led was halfhearted. And while MP Michel Murr backs the Aoun bloc, his son, Deputy PM and Minister of Defense Elias Murr, is determined not to back Aoun and the FPM.

2. (C) Gemayel was less sanguine about the future of Lebanon's presidency, which, under the Ta'if agreement, must be held by a Maronite Christian. He stressed that Lebanon needs a strong Christian president after all these years of having a Syrian puppet (Emile Lahoud) in the office. Gemayel is also adamantly opposed to the idea of a two-year interim presidency (as proposed by Michel Murr), and also to delaying the presidential election for lack of a two-thirds parliamentary quorum. Gemayel advocated rallying March 14 forces to agree on a presidential candidate, then, barring the two-thirds parliamentary quorum, holding the election with a majority of only 51 percent of MP's present.

3. (C) The Ambassador and Gemayel agreed that amending the constitution would be disastrous for Lebanon's unity and stability. Aoun's support of Hizballah's proposal to change the current 50-50 division of power between Muslims and Christians to a division by thirds (among Christians, Sunni, and Shi'a) smacked of intrigue, according to Gemayel, as did the two-year interim presidency idea, and was especially threatening for the Christian population. End summary.

CONFIDENT OF SUCCESS IN METN BY-ELECTION

4. (C) In a July 23 meeting with the Ambassador at his Bikfaya residence, Gemayel was upbeat about his chances of winning the parliamentary seat left vacant by his murdered son Pierre. Discounting FPM candidate Camille Khoury's chances of victory, Gemayel said Tashnaq's support of Khoury was at best lukewarm, and would perhaps bring him about 5000 votes, whereas the Armenian vote was well over 10,000.

Gemayel also indicated that Elias Murr is seeking an alliance with him, and is trying to get his father Michel to leave Aoun's bloc, or at least remain neutral. Gemayel thinks that by having the FPM contest the election, Aoun is trying to get back at him for refusing to accept his condolences after Pierre's murder. (Gemayel said Aoun had insulted Pierre in a television interview a few days before Pierre was killed, and now there was no way he (Gemayel) would take the initiative and visit Aoun to set things right.) Gemayel also mentioned that he had no choice but to run in this by-election, but that his other son Sami would run in the next full parliamentary election in 2009.

PLAGUED BY WORRY OVER FUTURE OF THE PRESIDENCY--AND LEBANON  
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15. (C) Gemayel is adamantly opposed to the idea of a two-year interim president as proposed by Michel Murr, and emphasized the need for a strong Christian president who could restore the confidence and prestige of the presidency, represent all Lebanese, and especially the Christians. As evidence of Aoun's scheming, Gemayel confided that Aoun aide MP Ibrahim Kenaan had proposed to him that he (Gemayel) should be the interim president. Of course, after two years Aoun himself would run in the presidential election, confident of winning a full six-year term. Gemayel agreed with the Ambassador that the constitution must not be tampered with in order to facilitate a two-year presidency, especially one with Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman as a candidate. Gemayel referred to Sleiman as a Syrian puppet who is in direct contact with Syrian President Bashar Asad. Furthermore, the LAF's battle against Fatah al-Islam in Nahr al-Barid would be exploited to boost Sleiman's image in a bid for the presidency.

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16. (C) Gemayel proposed that March 14 rally forces to decide on a candidate, and after trying to obtain the two-thirds quorum, holding the election, even if only with 51 percent of MP's present. He is convinced Hizballah would be intent on destroying this approach, but thought that Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and even Michel Murr could be won over, adding that he did not think that even Aoun trusted Hizballah completely--after all he is Christian and a Maronite.

17. (C) Commenting on Hizballah parliamentary bloc leader Mohamed Ra'd's questioning the need to hold the presidential election on time, as well his calls for a national unity government and a consensus presidential candidate, Gemayel said postponing the election would amount to institutional and security chaos. He added FPM leader Aoun was playing the "dirty game of Hizballah" in trying to destroy the election. Gemayel also shared the Ambassador's view that Hizballah's proposed division of power by thirds among Sunnis, Shi'a, and Christians would destroy the Ta'if Agreement and result in dangerously weakening Lebanon's Christians. This would induce them to emigrate in ever greater numbers, as would another Hizballah-instigated war with Israel.

FELTMAN